

# Developing

by Emily Will

*A challenge from Teusaquillo  
Mennonite Church in Colombia*

*Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like this. A man takes a mustard seed and sows it in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it grows up, it is the biggest of all plants. It becomes a tree, so that birds come and make their nests in its branches.—Matthew 13:31-32, New English Version*

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**L**ast spring, for the second time, I visited Teusaquillo Mennonite Church in Bogotá, Colombia. This congregation is a sister church of the one I belong to in Tucson, Ariz., Shalom Mennonite Fellowship.

Teusaquillo's kingdom work reminds me of the mustard seed parable. This church of a couple hundred people in Colombia's teeming capital of 7.5 million has been sheltering the many displaced and hunted individuals who come to nest in its branches—some for a season until they can migrate to political asylum, mainly in Canada, others for the long term.

Our sister church's ability to produce such a thriving "tree" rests upon its strong spiritual base.

Teusaquillo's members devote ample time to prayer. Every Saturday morning—as just one example—a small group of women meet for three hours. Some are fasting. They gather in one of the church's upper rooms to pray for their own and others' families; for their pastor, Peter Stucky; for lay leaders; for the persecuted and for peace.

(Colombia has endured sporadic armed conflict for almost 60 years, with marked acceleration since the 1990s.)

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# spiritual roots

It's easy to overlook the power of spiritual disciplines, especially in cultures that value action. This is understandable. Deeds are tangible, whereas—like the mustard tree's roots—we cannot view the spiritual realm.

I confess to valuing the seen over the unseen, even with plants, though as a master gardener I should know better. In one training session, the instructor presented two photographs. The first depicted a hale tree, about six years old, with a straight trunk and healthy green leaves. In the second photo, however, the presumed healthy tree had blown over, uprooted. Its now-visible roots were coiled in a tight cylinder.

**What had gone wrong?** The instructor explained that the sapling had languished too long in a cramped pot, which had warped its roots. In the ground, the roots had been able to transport nutrients to the branches, but they were too deformed to stretch out and support the tree's growing weight. The poor anchoring did not become apparent until a stiff breeze ripped the tree out.

My visits to Teusaquillo challenge me to think about my own spiritual roots. Are they twisted? Shallow? Would they keep me anchored in an environment as stormy as Colombia's?

The spiritual roots of the Colombian Mennonite Church must be deep and strong; they are producing some remarkable results amid turbulence. Although reluctant to talk about the outcomes, some of which are miraculous, church members are experiencing the gifts of the Holy Spirit in healing and offering physical protection to the persecuted.

Take the case of Juan Gomez and his wife, Jakelin, from a city southeast of Bogotá.

In 2003, Juan worked for an airline at his city's airport, selling tickets, arranging paperwork for cargo. Wanting to get ahead, Juan enrolled in criminal justice courses offered when Colombia's justice system was undergoing a major transformation. The former system had been patterned on France's, now it would be modeled on that of the United States.

One morning, Juan greeted and shook hands with one of his professors, who had arrived at the

airport. At the time he thought nothing of it, but that salutation would soon turn his life topsy-turvy. The professor worked for Colombia's federal attorney general's office. That office was about to initiate a sting operation at the airport, which was controlled by a paramilitary group. Officials videotaped everyone on the scene and recorded personal identification numbers.

By shaking the professor's hand, Juan had unwittingly associated himself with the forces behind the sting. In the paramilitaries' eyes, he became an enemy.

Soon two men, with their comandante, came to Juan's house, forced him into a car and drove to a place unfamiliar to him. Once out of the car, they confiscated Juan's national identification carnet. They grilled him, not just about the professor at the airport but about another professor as well, also from the attorney general's office, with whom Juan had taken a forensics class. The students had helped perform autopsies on two paramilitaries.

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**The comandante slapped Juan**, ordered him to kneel and held a gun to his temple. When Juan broke into tears, the comandante, surprisingly, let him go, saying, "Don't worry, your problems will be solved in five days."

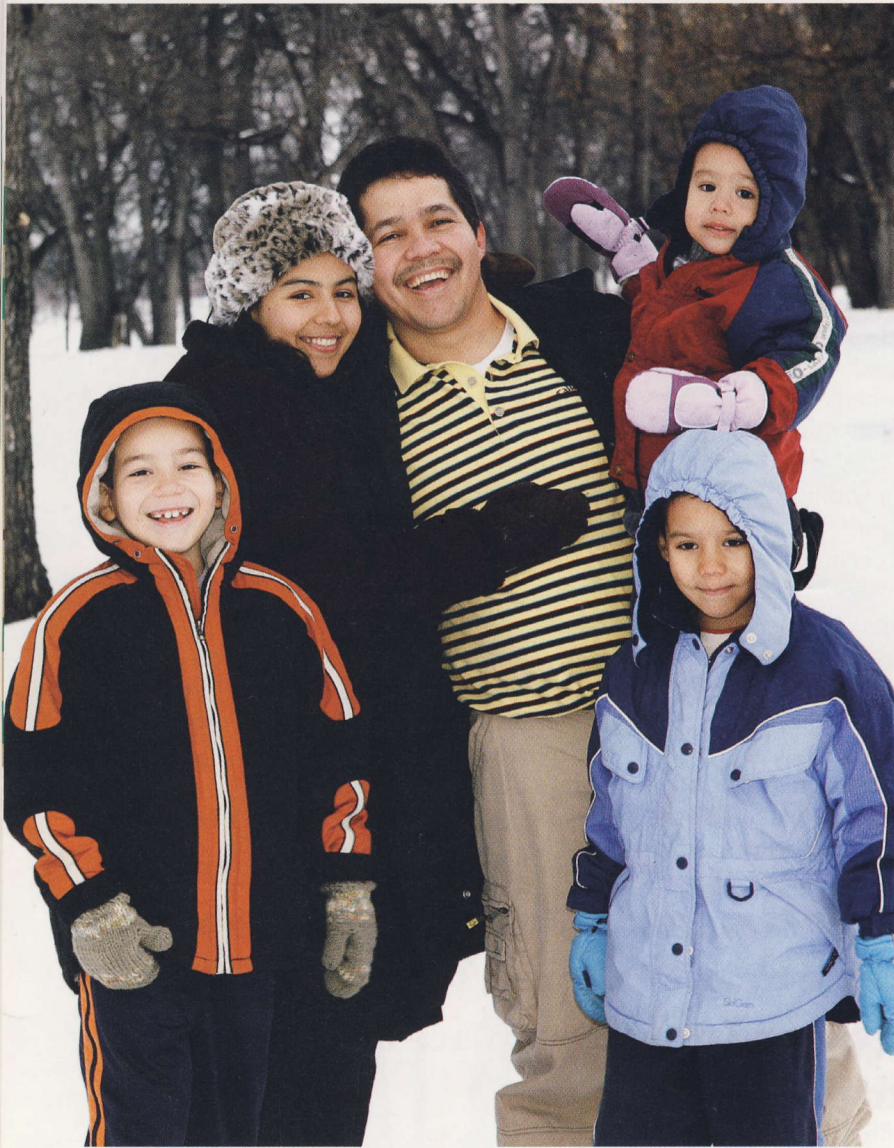
From a former friend's experience, Juan knew the man's meaning: the paramilitaries would kill him within five days.

A cat-and-mouse hunt began. Juan hid in a series of places, first in his hometown, then in Bogotá. The paramilitaries remained a step behind. His sister, even his mother-in-law in another town, began receiving anonymous threatening phone calls, asking for Juan by name.

Eventually Jakelin and the couple's two preschool sons, as well as Juan's sister, also fled to Bogotá. They had joined the 3 to 3.5 million dis-

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Joanie Peters

**Topsy-turvy:** Jakelin and Juan Gomez and their children, who now live in Winnipeg.

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placed in Colombia, a country of 46 million and second only to Sudan in its number of internal refugees.

In Bogotá, Juan sought redress with a human rights organization; he believes this made the paramilitary group even more determined to get him.

While Juan resided in one sector of Bogotá, men canvassed his neighbors, showing Juan's car-net photo and asking for him.

Juan moved to another neighborhood. One day he was astonished to see copies of his photo, and some of his sister, plastered on the walls. The paramilitary group instructed a neighbor to tell Juan that for it, "an extremely large company,"

Bogotá, as huge and populous as it may be, was no more than "a little handkerchief."

Like many other dislodged and hounded people, Juan arrived at Teusaquillo Mennonite seeking help. The church provided refuge for Juan and his family for several days while one of the more intense waves of persecution ran its course. During this time, Juan volunteered to paint the church's third-floor walls. He noticed some were damaged due to leaks.

**As Juan scaled the roof to make repairs,** he lost his balance and fell through some plastic roofing tiles. He plummeted at the worst possible spot—a space open from the roof to an inner courtyard on the ground three stories below—some 12 meters (39 feet) onto concrete. (By comparison, the Olympic high-dive is 10 meters, or 33 feet, high.)

Some church members heard the crash and rushed to the scene. They phoned an ambulance. During the quarter hour or so until the paramedics arrived, the pastor held Juan and prayed, "Juan, in Jesus' name, breathe. Bones, organs, in Jesus' name, be healed."

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Another doctor ordered a sonogram. It showed a fractured pelvis encased in blood, indicating ruptured organs. She sent Juan to intensive care to be readied for surgery. An hour later, right before surgery, the doctor requested another sonogram. It showed no damage—no blood, no fracture. She sent for several colleagues, seeking an explanation for the change. None had any.

Throughout Juan's hospital stay, many doctors visited, wanting to see the miracle for themselves. Juan told them that when he went through the roof, he had grabbed a ledge and seeing the



immense height, prayed, "Lord, cover me." He then went into a free fall. About half way down, Juan said it felt as though something like heavy air turned his body so that instead of falling on his feet or head, he landed on his side. He believed God physically supported him during the fall, buffering him.

**A complication required ongoing medical attention.** During the plunge, Juan had brushed against barbed wire, and several pieces of it became embedded in one foot. Treatment required grafts. Gangrene set in; doctors feared they'd have to amputate. But the grafts took well, and antibiotics wiped out the gangrene.

When I first met Juan in July 2005, his foot was bandaged, and he used a crutch. He had another grafting operation scheduled, and he and Jakelin were to visit the Canadian Embassy the next day to see if they'd be granted political asylum.

I heard no more about the family until last March. After obtaining their phone number, I called them and learned they had been in Winnipeg for almost a year; they were attending Douglas Mennonite Church there.

Juan and Jakelin are grateful for a smooth transition to a different culture and climate. A church member gave them a car, an act of generosity that awed them.

Juan and Jacklin feel they are living proof that God is an active force in the world. Juan says some people think he's a fanatic, always talking about God's power. He'll never forget the great things God has done for him, however, and he cannot keep quiet. He doesn't yet know what he'll do long term, but likely it will have something to do with the ministry, at least informally.

Members of Teusaquillo Mennonite have had their prayers answered several other times.

In 2004, Yobani, a displaced man the church was trying to protect (after two close brushes with death) was kidnapped and stuffed into a car trunk. Church members gathered to pray when they heard the news. The car had a flat tire. When the kidnappers opened the trunk for the spare, Yobani asked for permission to relieve himself. At the edge of the mountainous road, in the dark, Yobani flung himself over the side. The kidnappers fired at him but did not hit him. Despite a stab wound on his leg inflicted by his captors when he resisted getting into the trunk, Yobani escaped to safety.

**In 2005, Isabel, a persecuted woman,** was abducted on her way to a meeting at the church. She was taken to a paramilitary camp well out of

the city and told to await the commandante. Church members prayed fervently for Isabel. When the commandante hadn't arrived after several days, one of her guards, deciding Isabel reminded him too much of his mother, secreted her to a road, where she escaped to a city eight hours from Bogotá. Isabel later learned the young man who

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Since the late 1990s, Teusaquillo Mennonite has helped dozens and dozens of individuals threatened by paramilitaries, guerrilla groups and government forces. The congregation's justice and peace committee listens to their stories, prays with them and helps them search for alternatives for their lives. They emphasize the need to place themselves under the protection of God—who alone can protect them in Colombia—and under the faith community's spiritual cover.

Pastor Stucky has referred to this as a protective shield provided by the church's prayers. None of the hundreds of people who have followed this guidance have been killed. "God has honored the church's faith and action," Stucky says.

For me, Teusaquillo Mennonite embodies Jesus' parable. Although small in size, like the tiny mustard seed, it has grown to produce a tree with a wide canopy able to shade and protect those who rest in its branches. The Teusaquillo church takes heed of the vital role of strong spiritual roots in supporting it. Members nourish those roots with prayer, fasting, Bible study—spiritual practices—in tandem with concrete deeds to care for the physical needs of the marginalized and dispossessed.

May we pray for their ongoing faithfulness, and may they continue to challenge those of us who neglect our spiritual roots.

*Emily Will is a member of Shalom Mennonite Church in Tucson, Ariz.*